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ABSTRACT

The language problems described here concerned undergraduate college science courses taught by foreign Teaching Assistants, whose students claimed they could not understand their instructors' English. Upon investigation it was clear that a standard course in English was not sufficient to deal with the communication problems caused not only by linguistic difficulties but also by intercultural conflicts. A special course for TA's now encompasses linguistic practice, intercultural communication workshops, and an introduction to American classroom methods. Many of the assignments are structured to necessitate some form of interaction, as it is felt that social interaction with Americans, even more than class work, effects the greatest progress in fluency. The program has evidenced increased understanding of intercultural interactions and changed classroom behavior on the part of the TA's. An improvement in English proficiency, however, has not been realized as the TA's "see no need and no reward for extensive work in English." Unless language learning is seen, the author points out, not as an end in itself, but as a means to achievement within integral parts of life and work, there will be no significant language learning. (A discussion of some of the materials and techniques used in the program is included.)

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INTERFERENCE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Some comments on designing a course in English for foreign instructors

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INTERFERENCE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING:

Some comments on designing a course in English for foreign instructors

Teachers involved in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) tend to accept as an article of faith that sufficient exposure to audio-lingual methods of foreign language teaching in the classroom ultimately will result in language learning. We tend to ignore that factors other than language aptitude and efficient methods of teaching may be important considerations, as our experience in designing a special program for foreign instructors at our university clearly illustrates. We report on our findings here, not because we managed to design a totally successful program, but because we believe others may profit from our very failures as well as from the approach to such a problem.

When the English Language Institute was approached for help by one of our science departments, the matter seemed straight forward enough. The problem was one of English proficiency: many of the undergraduate science courses are taught by foreign teaching assistants, and the students in these courses claimed they could not understand the instructors' English.

The obvious solution seemed to be that this was a linguistic problem to be solved by a linguistic solution; to wit, one of our standard courses in advanced oral English. But communication problems

in intercultural¹ relations do not always lend themselves to an obvious interpretation so we decided to investigate. Our findings were neither exceptionally perceptive nor really surprising. Still, it became very clear that a standard course in English was not sufficient to deal with this problem. For anyone concerned with designing, setting up and improving courses in TESOL, our experience was a valuable reminder that language is a form of communication between human beings who want to interact, and that any amount of audio-lingual drills will not be efficient in language teaching if one overlooks this.

Our procedures of investigation consisted mainly of extensive interviews and two workshops with the purpose to identify the problem and to look for practical solutions. It soon became clear that everyone involved, the faculty, the TA's and the students, had different perceptions of the problem, and that there were serious discrepancies between the actual problem and the perceptions of it.

Briefly, we found the following situation. The science department offered an introductory laboratory course with a professor in charge, who was from the Midwest and one of our university's most liberal and active in student affairs. The teaching assistants, most of whom were foreign students working on their doctorate, actually taught the course, and there were weekly meetings during which the professor handed out and discussed the following week's experiments. The professor expected from the TA's comments on the experiments, questions on the content and certainly inquiries about unfamiliar aspects. The absence of such

¹As used in this paper, "intercultural" is used to designate interface relationships between individuals from different cultures, while "cross-cultural" is used to refer to comparison of norms between separate cultures.

comments signified to him that all was well.

Most of the TA's came from cultures where the concept of "face" is important, and they would never voluntarily admit to any kind of ignorance in public. They often felt that they wanted more time for better preparation, they criticized the experiments as having many mistakes and deletions, and occasionally they were unfamiliar with the equipment (lasers, for instance.) But no TA would dream of saying so to the professor at their weekly meetings. When this was later pointed out to the professor, he could at first not believe that his assistants were not perfectly at ease to make whatever comments on the experiments they felt appropriate. The intercultural interaction here is not only between different countries, but it is also intra-cultural between Academia's own very prescribed and rank-conscious culture and Midwest egalitarianism. "Nice" professors don't realize the very real power they have over their doctoral students. "I guess that is true, but I never thought of it," was the professor's comment when we pointed this out. Not only, then, did the TA's own cultural background contribute to their reluctance to actively comment on and criticize the experiments, but their situation as doctoral students further aggravated the lack of communication.

As doctoral students, the TA's were supported in their academic work by an assistantship which was necessary for their academic survival. They had been notified by letter of their scholarship but not of their teaching obligations. The day after they arrived they were given a science test on the basis of which they were assigned the year's coursework and informed that they would teach a course. All TA's confessed to more or less acute bewilderment and disorientation at the beginning

is the medium of instruction and communication in this society. Often they do not realize that they have not understood a question and answer to something quite different, which furthers the undergraduate's bewilderment. To further complicate matters, the TA's often lecture with fantastic rapidity in strongly accented English, possibly to prove their familiarity with the language. The undergraduates have long since learned not to ask questions on the lecture since the answer is likely to be more of what they couldn't understand in the first place.

The undergraduates were very unhappy and it was their voiced complaint that made the department contact the Institute. Almost all of them come from our city and they have never had contact with foreigners. The course is required. The undergraduates are caught in the same bind as the TA's. As students, they are not likely to want to call attention to themselves by repeating a question the instructor did not understand and so challenge his authority. The common consensus of the undergraduates was that you don't risk offending anyone who assigns you a grade at the end of the term. At the same time the TA's complained that their students did not ask intelligent questions. It had not occurred to them that their authoritative (like that of their former professors) approach to teaching did not exactly encourage a give-and-take atmosphere in the labs. And of course there was the problem of English.

Everyone involved in the interviews and workshops registered an ease of tension merely by being in an environment so structured that communication was facilitated and they became willing to share their problems and criticism. Miscommunication and lack of feedback within the structure of the department were very clearly some of the major sources for the dissatisfaction. There was a frequently voiced comment

of the school year. Neither they nor the professor were aware of the fact that foreign students often suffer from a malady known as culture shock when they first arrive in a country quite different from their own. A typical symptom of culture shock is rejection of the host culture and withdrawal from initiating intercultural relationships. The TA's did not want to go out of their way to talk to Americans.

Scientists tend to be more interested in science than in teaching. The entire reward system within the department favored research above teaching. Teaching and correcting papers was time consuming and took time away from the TA's own research. Advanced doctoral students became research assistants which was a more prestigious appointment. There was no reward for good teaching; what counted was doing good scientific work, which did not necessitate fluent English. In short, the TA's did not see any reason for improving their English in order to improve their teaching, when what they wanted was to get out of teaching as soon as possible. The professor and the chairman were astounded to have this pointed out to them; they are both deeply concerned about the undergraduate teaching, but they are also scientists and see the particular structure within the department as given, necessitated by the particular demands of science. The reward system remains an unsolvable problem in motivating the TA's to learn English.

The TA's come from authoritarian cultures. In such cultures a professor would tend to lose "face" if he admitted that he did not understand the questions of his students, if, indeed, there were any questions. This attitude is perpetuated by the students when they become TA's in this country. There is no question of the TA's knowledge of science, but they do not readily follow the colloquial English, which

by both TA's and undergraduates that they didn't feel that anyone cared for them personally.

But the major difficulty in improving the English of the TA's lay in the very real lack of motivation. They came to our program because it had been forced upon them, but they saw very little reason for improving their teaching. Because of their negative attitude toward a strange culture and strange behavior, which they could not interpret, they reduced their social interaction with Americans to a minimum. To give but one example, one day the instructor chanced upon a TA, livid with rage at American supercilious behavior. It appeared that a pretty girl had told him "see you around over the week-end." For two days he waited at home for her to call on him. It took the instructor over an hour to convince him that unless an American specifies time and place, he doesn't intend such a remark to be taken literally.

It was at this time very clear that any amount of class time in ESOL would not make them fluent. Beyond the skills level, language is communication, and without the desire to communicate, training in verbal linguistic skills was not sufficient to increase their English proficiency if they did not use these skills outside the classroom. As we have pointed out, one reason for their lack of willingness to interact socially with Americans, was that much of the miscommunication, the negative attitude toward Americans, was based on cultural interference. A class in English would have to take these factors into account. We quote from the instructor's report of the last workshop:

"My own reaction . . . is that there is little disagreement² about what is happening. So perception is not the problem. The problem is encouraging the TA's to learn English and be better teachers when the structure of the program mediates against this. The foreign TA's are here to get Ph.D.'s. The best way of getting it is to do research. They have to teach. They do it. The need here is to so structure their program so that it is apparent by words as well as by departmental concern that their function as a teacher is quite valuable and that they can best serve in this capacity by being articulate in the language of physics, spoken American English, and general sensitivity to Americans and their culture both in and outside the classroom."

We then designed the course to encompass the three elements of linguistic practice, intercultural communication workshops, and an introduction to American classroom methods. Now when the TA's are informed of their scholarships, participation in the English course is written in as part of their TA duties so that it is part of their expectance of academic work long before they arrive.

The linguistic elements of the course are those in standard use. If we have no TOEFL scores, we administer the Michigan English Language Proficiency Test. This way we have an approximate idea of their English proficiency and the particular areas in which they need improvement. We attempt to individualize their program as much as possible. But it remains true that their reading comprehension and passive knowledge of linguistic patterns are high, that their aural comprehension of colloquial American English is faulty, and that their pronunciation is awful. Class time is primarily dedicated to oral English as far as language teaching is concerned. There are individualized drills on interference from Chinese (r/l), Indian retroflexives, Spanish (b/v),

² The point here is any longer. With the interviews and workshops, the discrepancy in perception of the problem had virtually disappeared. This had been the first step in establishing communication.

etc. as well as exercises on stress and intonation. But there is also an introduction to writing scientific papers and their presentation, to which the TA's relate personally as they see the need for it in their own doctoral work. Choosing textbooks of course is a headache. Mostly we forage, but we use Markman and Waddell³ for writing papers, Crowell⁴ for reference grammar, and Phinney⁵ for the oral exercises. We use the introductory science textbook as a source for selecting vocabulary and sentences for stress and intonation and also for oral reports.

There are also auditory comprehension exercises which are done in the language laboratory. They include such things as Listen and Guess⁶, taped lectures with comprehension questions, SRA exercises⁷, pop songs, taped TV interviews, etc. Once a week the Institute invites some interesting campus personality to lecture informally to the whole institute on a wide range of subjects from culture shock to sports and campus riots. Following the lecture there are informal discussions, led by an institute instructor, on the lecture they have just heard. These discussions afford an excellent opportunity for students to react to aspects of American life and to have them explained.

³Roberta H. Markman and Marie F. Waddell, Ten Steps in Writing the Research Paper, (Woodbury, New York; Barron's Educational Series, 1965).

⁴Thomas Lee Crowell, Jr., Index to Modern English, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

⁵Maxine G. Phinney, English Conversation Practices, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1968.

⁶Robert L. Allen and Virginia F. Allen Listen and Guess, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1965.

⁷SRA Reading Laboratory 111b Science Research Associates, Inc. Chicago, Ill. 1963.

However, we emphasize that class work will not in itself make them fluent, and that it is in social interaction with Americans that their greatest progress will come. To encourage this, many of the assignments are so structured as to necessitate some form of interaction. "Ask five Americans what they think of 'X';" "Invite an American colleague to have a cup of coffee and report on the conversation," are typical assignments. We emphasize that they must learn to interact with Americans and be sensitive to perceptions different from theirs. We talk about cultural relativism and non-verbal communication in a general sensitivity training to American culture in and out of the class room. They needn't prefer American culture to their own, nor even like it, but they must learn its ways if they are to live anywhere near full lives here. We do some very elementary things such as lessons in basic American etiquette, how to order a meal or ask a girl for a date. We also discuss how deviation from standard behavior will be perceived by an American. For example, Libyan males may walk hand in hand in Tripoli but we certainly advise them not to do it with Americans in Kansas City. A Latin-American may not feel friendly standing 2 feet from a friend in conversation, but he will make an American feel uncomfortable if he crowds him. Most of all, we try to make them aware of the cultural variables in social intercourse and to be able to acknowledge and verbalize negative as well as positive reactions in intercultural relationships. Once they can do this, they seem to be able to proceed on their own in intercultural relationships.

We don't really believe that we can give a course in American university pedagogy, but we do attempt to discuss some of the past

lab behavior which led to general unrest among the students. We have the TA's assign monitors in their own classes to check on lecture speed, we have them assign questions for feedback on their own teaching, we visit their classes and discuss the teaching situations. Most of all, the TA's own instructor in the English course demonstrates a willingness to be corrected, contradicted and questioned. It is very difficult to make the TA's correct and contradict their instructor, and it takes many weeks until they can bring themselves to do so, and even then they have to be cajoled, scolded and played into doing it. But we do believe that until a confidence in questioning and a willingness to criticize become part of their own behavior, they won't accept it naturally from their own students. And their own students must be able to ask questions and comment freely if any real teaching is to take place.

It would be very gratifying to report that the program has been an unmitigated success. Probably we will never be able to do so. If by success we mean achievement of the program objectives in terms of (1) improving English proficiency, (2) of increasing understanding of intercultural interactions, and (3) changing classroom behavior, the latter two objectives have been reached, although without objective measures it is impossible to ascertain the exact degree to which they have been achieved. But as far as systematic improvement of the TA's English is concerned, we have been less than successful. Given the structure of the department, there is very little we can do to motivate the TA's to spend time and energy in the often grueling work of perfecting their English at the advanced oral levels. The TA's see no need and no reward for extensive

work in English, and without being able to control this variable, no program can be a success. One may of course speculate that increased cross-cultural understanding will lead to increased social interaction with Americans and so facilitate improvement in oral English, but that remains an idle speculation.

We did achieve increased communication within the department, which resulted in a common understanding of the problem (a badly taught laboratory course) and of the possible solutions. This was hardly an objective within the scope of the program, but one which in retrospect seems as worthy as any other. There was a decrease in tension and less complaining by the undergraduates which may be a measure of success as seen by the faculty. In the course of working with the program, it became quite clear to us that unless language learning is seen, not as an end in itself, but as a means to achievement within integral parts of life and work, there will be no significant language learning. In other words, as long as teaching is not seen as an integral part of advanced scientific work and as long as advanced scientific work is possible without extensive oral English, we doubt that we can teach the TA's a measurable amount of oral English.